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SUBJECT: NEW HEALTH MINISTER: MORE HOSPITALS, FEWER MEDICAL JUNKETS

¶1. (U) Summary. The Ambassador and new Minister of Health Ali Al-Barrak laid the groundwork for USG-GOK cooperation in the healthcare sector during a very cordial meeting on July ¶8. The Minister highlighted the GOK's intention to build additional hospitals, which the Ambassador noted would benefit from cost-effective, high-quality American medical equipment and supplies. End Summary.

¶2. (U) During an extremely relaxed July introductory call with the Ambassador, the new Minister of Health, Ali Mohammed Al-Barrak, made clear his intent to engage with U.S. companies in the healthcare sector.

¶3. (U) Just as many other newly-appointed ministers, given the transitional nature of recent GOK governments, Al-Barrak was tentative about his long-term plans, though he did emphasize the GOK's intention to expand the number of hospital beds in Kuwait, including building new medical facilities. (Note: The Amir recently stated an objective of 200-240 new hospital beds. End Note.) The Ambassador reminded the Minister of the relative advantage of high-quality American medical equipment and supplies, since current exchange rates render American products highly cost-effective. Noting the high number of visa requests received by the Embassy in connection with medical travel, the Ambassador remarked that higher levels of quality of healthcare in Kuwaiti hospitals would permit the Ministry of Health to reduce the number of patient referrals to overseas hospitals, with accompanying higher administrative costs. (Note: Al-Barrack has been criticized recently for his reported "independent vetting" of eligibility for overseas medical travel. The GOK pays all expenses for what has become, in the view of many, medical junkets to the U.S. and Europe. End Note.)

¶4. (U) The Ambassador also took this opportunity to acknowledge and praise the professional and transparent support of two ministry officials who have provided valuable assistance to the Embassy's Commercial Section, UnderSecretary Dr. Essa Khalifa and Director of Quality Control Omar Al-Sayed Omar. (Note: To distinguish them from the unfortunately often corrupt practices of others in the Ministry. End Note.)

¶5. (U) The Minister and Ambassador also discussed the challenges of diabetes, obesity and related conditions facing both Kuwait and the United States, as well as surprisingly China (according to a recent BBC report). The Ambassador mentioned the recent visits by teams from Johns Hopkins University and Harvard University to the GOK's Dasman Center for Research and Treatment of Diabetes; the Minister was familiar with these visits and welcomed further such cooperation. (Note: Post understands that the well-funded, but under-utilized Dasman Center has recently entered into a partnership agreement with Harvard Medical School's Forsyth Institute. End Note.)

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Significant commercial opportunities

exist for U.S. companies in Kuwait's healthcare sector, particularly in the areas of health maintenance and diabetes. We will encourage U.S. companies to capitalize on the Minister's desire, at the reported bequest of the Amir, to expand healthcare at home. End Comment.

17. (SBU) Biographical notes: Minister Al-Barrak graduated from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI in the late 1970's and harbors warm feelings towards the U.S. The Minister, who previously served as UnderSecretary in the Ministry of Education, told the Ambassador that he had been tapped to run the ministry for his managerial, not technical skills (his predecessor, Maasouma Saleh Al-Mubarak, resigned in the wake of intense criticism from Kuwaiti MPs following a fire at Jahra Hospital). The Minister, who speaks excellent English, has four children, two daughters (one a lawyer, one an engineer) and two sons, whom he intends to send to the U.S. for college.

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